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Editorial

THE USES OF HISTORY TO THE CHURCH OF TODAY

The uses of history are perennial and universal. They appear the moment we begin to think about the meaning of history. For history is the whole story of man. It begins with the story of man in his earliest struggles with Nature, in his earliest conquests and achievements, ever widening and deepening until we today find ourselves in the splendors of our modern material civilization. History includes the whole story of man in his relations to Nature.

History includes also the story of man in his progressive knowledge of himself as an individual and as a race. For after a while he discovered himself, and then other selves. Just as he found himself in a life-and-death struggle with Nature, so he found himself in a struggle with himself, with his differentiated self, with himself in the dim but ever clarifying and emerging organization of himself and his fellows. As society developed and differentiated he became conscious of himself in his relations to society—to which he was subject, to whose maintenance and progress he was to give of his material accumulations and his time and his thought.

History is, moreover, the story of man from the moment when wonder awoke at the center of his being and he began to inquire about the why and the wherefore, about the beginning and the end of things, about the content of his thought, about the great, insistent, all-comprehending, irresistible conception of himself in his relations to destiny. He has never been able to suppress this "irresistible requirement of human reason." His attempts at

solution have resulted in colossal systems which commanded the assent of the world for a time, then slowly crumbled and sank in ruins, only to have their places taken by others which also crumble and sink. But the desire burns, and can only be allayed by these rising and dissolving constructions.

History is, then, the whole story of man in his relations to Nature, to society, and to God.

But being this, history is also the line of approach to all the great disciplines that make up the circle of knowledge. It is the discipline of disciplines, in whose light and under whose guidance all problems of all possible kinds must be approached and solved, if men do not wish to go on groping, repeating mistakes that have already been made, and making contributions that have already been contributed. Very wisely, therefore, each discipline is looking carefully into its own history; inquiring concerning the environments of each stage of progress; and seeking to conserve the true, to eliminate the false or outworn, and so to put itself in a position intelligently and effectively to make the contribution that the times particularly demand. This is true in the field of theology. Biblical study, theology, church polity, sociology are all, and of necessity, poaching on the preserves of history, for otherwise they would have no abiding foundation or regulating principles.

It might appear, then, that the strength of history is at the same time its weakness. For if every discipline is writing its own history, and if history must always be a large part of its stock in trade, where is history? But the answer is clear. It is the fundamental discipline, the clearing-house of all thought, the correlating and regulating discipline of all disciplines.

But what are the uses of history to the church? In the first place, history enables the church to find its definite location in this all-comprehensive world-process. We may think of the church as "The communion or fellowship of the saints which has come into existence through the proclamation of the Word of God heard and received through faith," with a divinely called ministry, building it up in the faith and leading it out in the effort to embrace all mankind. It is the Pauline conception of fellowship divine and human—a double relationship, which must always be taken in

combination. In history we see the working out of this conception, the difficulty of the problem, the disaster that has always followed the emphasizing of either side to the exclusion or minimizing of the other. In the light of history the church may see itself in its mistakes and triumphs, in its divine mission, in its central location as the greatest institution in the world; an institution whose fellowship no man, rich or poor, learned or unlearned, may pass by without serious consequences to his spiritual growth.

History is useful to the church today, in the second place, in revealing the origin, development, and transformations of its leading doctrines. It is a long and checkered story that connects the first century with the twentieth. If we glance, for example, at our doctrine of the Trinity, noting the absence of philosophical statement in the New Testament, the awakening of reflection, the emergence of the problem, the beginning of debate, the rising of temper, the culmination at Nicaea with its creed born of bitterness, we cannot help being impressed that the whole transaction was a very human affair, and that when we pass out of experience into exact definition we ought not to think of finalities. History does not mention any revival of evangelical religion that ever arose out of a council like Nicaea, or Chalcedon, or any of the earlier controversies about doctrine or church polity. A knowledge of history keeps us from becoming hysterical when we see statements even that have endured through ages, and on which we have relied, dissolving in the larger and truer views of truth.

In the third place the knowledge of history impresses upon the church the thought of its inheritance. When we remember all that lies back of us, the struggles through darkness and dimness to the light, the heroism, the adamant character, all of which seemed necessary to put us where we are today, we should be callous and ungrateful indeed if we did not feel the inspirational force of this inheritance which we are to pass on either impaired or enriched and enlarged.

In the fourth place the study of long stretches of history, the careful analysis of environments and motives, the constant recurrence of situations almost, but never quite, identical with previous situations, the remorseless coming of consequences, for weal or

for woe, may serve to make the church keen in discrimination and put it on its guard. The beginnings are almost always microscopic, and the good or the bad development is usually well under way before it is discovered by the obtuse. The baleful influences, for example, of much of our current literature are condensed in short sentences, or phrases, the meaning of which the unwary never see. But the one who has studied history as it really is will not be caught napping, for great leading tendencies with their complete psychology are plainly marked in history. The church, just because of its fundamental position in society, should thoroughly know tendencies. For example, despite all our enthusiasm about missions, does analysis show that all this enthusiasm is confined to a few great-minded, great-hearted leaders, who when they come from the ends of the earth to an Edinburgh Conference present an inspiring spectacle, but that it is not shared by the masses even of intelligent people, and that our young people are giving attention to everything else than missions and missionary literature? If this be true, the result is as certain as mathematics.

Finally, the study of history leads to liberalization. All uses of history plainly lead to a profounder feeling of sympathy and an abiding sense of fundamental unity. History shows us our forebears mightily toiling to serve their day and generation. We note their earnestness, fidelity, and industry. But more and more we see them exactly as they were, we deferentially estimate them at their true value, and through their knowledge and experience we are learning, not indeed to underestimate the particular emphasis and contribution of each sect, but to put greater emphasis on our points of agreement. And so in these latter days we are recognizing and coming into the fellowship, not only of the local church and of the particular denomination, but also of all the saints.